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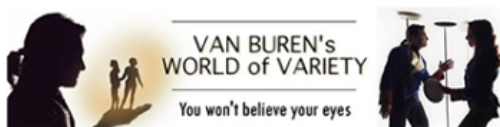
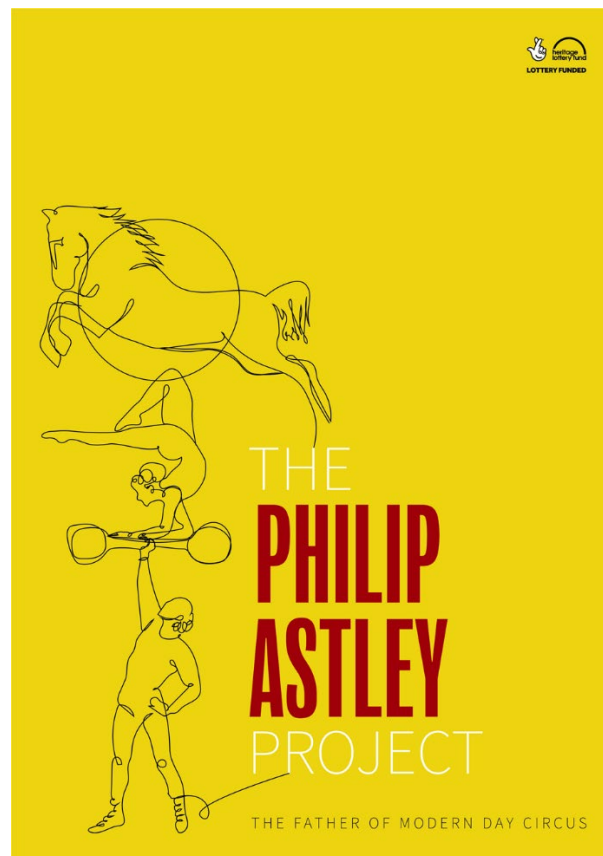
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# The Philip Astley Project – Celebrating the father of modern-day circus



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Final Project Report 2019

By Dr Carmel Thomason, Academic and Project Lead

February 2019

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## Brief Project Summary:

Philip Astley was born in Newcastle-under-Lyme in 1742. Internationally he is recognised as the 'father of modern circus but was not well known in his hometown. This project engaged almost 29,000 local people, increasing knowledge of Astley's legacy, and pride in Newcastle's heritage.

2018 was the 250th anniversary of the birth of modern-day circus and the project collaborated with the V&A Museum, who were also celebrating this anniversary.

Heritage learning opportunities, including workshops, talks, an exhibition, and a performance led by young people, began in 2017, leading up to a large heritage learning event in 2018.

By creating an engaging and versatile Resource Pack and up-skilling existing staff; organisations including Staffordshire University, the New Vic Theatre, the Brampton Museum, Staffordshire Library Service and Newcastle-under-Lyme College aimed to ensure that future generations can enjoy learning about Astley's story.

## Introduction

A Heritage Lottery funded programme, The Philip Astley Project aimed to raise the profile of Philip Astley locally, nationally and internationally and to reaffirm Newcastle-under-Lyme's role in circus history.

The project ran in parallel to Circus Past Present Future an Arts Council England Ambition for Excellence funded programme led by the New Vic Theatre. Although the projects focused on different objectives overall, both worked with multiple stakeholders to deliver high profile activities with the shared aim of celebrating Philip Astley and the 250th anniversary of the modern-day circus during 2017 and 2018.

Philip Astley, who was born in 1742, is known world-wide as the father of the modern-day circus. However, initial research carried out by the University in 2016 revealed that in Newcastle-under-Lyme, the Staffordshire town where Astley grew-up, only 11% of 2800 people surveyed had heard his name and fewer still knew of his connection to the circus as we know it today.

Although Astley didn't invent the many acts we now see performed under the umbrella of circus, he was the first to bring different acts such as clowns, acrobats and jugglers together in one show, and his 13m diameter circus ring is still in use today.

The 250th anniversary of circus, being celebrated nationally in 2018 under the banner of Circus250, provided a timely moment to raise awareness of Astley's family connections to Newcastle-under-Lyme, which can be traced over 100s of years. The overarching aim of the Philip Astley Project was to raise awareness of Newcastle-under-Lyme's heritage link to circus in a way that would bring the past to life in an engaging and accessible way, raising pride in the town's history.

Staffordshire University co-ordinated the project, working with multiple stakeholders to deliver a wide range of activities including workshops, talks, school events, an exhibition and a family festival. Carmel Thomason was the academic and project lead.

Carmel used the project as an opportunity to connect students to the wider community and to the heritage of the area in which they are studying, boosting community coherence among groups that live side-by-side but are often disconnected. More than 200 staff and students were involved from three of the University's 6 schools, involving students from 7 different degree courses at levels 5, 6 and 7.

In total more than 28,900 people have been directly involved in activities and the project has reached more than a million via mainstream media, social media, a dedicated website and an online educational resource pack, which includes activities for schools.

## Project Aims and Achievements

### Initial broad aims

- Heritage will be better identified and recorded
- Heritage will be better interpreted and explained
- People will have developed skills
- People will have volunteered time
- People will have learned about heritage

### Key outputs

- Almost 29,000 people were directly engaged in 47 separate events and related activities, including a family festival attended by more than 8,000 people.
- Staffordshire University worked with a group of six volunteers from The Brampton Museum to research Astley's life and legacy.
- Several new research findings were recorded in a publicly available resource pack produced by Staffordshire University and in an Astley Archive at The Brampton Museum. An associated exhibition Philip Astley: His Life and Legacy at The Brampton Museum was attended by 16,700 people.
- 265 adults received formal training such as heritage social media, research skills, storytelling and drama, and circus skills.
- 63 members of the public volunteered time and approximately 200 staff and students at Staffordshire University were involved through content creation, workshops and embedded curriculum activities.

- More than a million people have been exposed to key messages through media and marketing. Media coverage included regional and national print and broadcast media and international print coverage in Japan, USA and Canada.

## Achievements

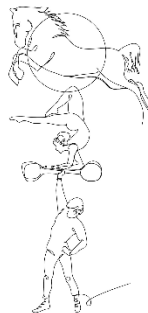
### Resource packs and exhibition researching Astley's Life and Legacy

Carmel Thomason from Staffordshire University worked with Brampton Museum and a group of volunteers to research the life of Philip Astley and his family in Newcastle-under-Lyme and the role of Astley's theatrical performances in shaping recreational life of the period. The research process

#### THE PHILIP ASTLEY PROJECT

THE PHILIP ASTLEY PROJECT

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was based on a model that can be best described as a Culture 3.0 approach to co-production as laid out in Boehm C. (2016) Academia in Culture 3.0: a Crime story of Death and Rebirth (but also of Curation, Innovation and Sector Mash-ups).

REPERTÓRIO: Teatro & Dança, 19 (27). pp.37-48. ISSN 2175-8131. This is an approach that focuses on co-creation, co-production and a more immersive form of cultural engagement between academic communities of practice and wider society, with the engagement and design built into the design process.

The research was compiled and curated into an exhibition "Philip Astley: His Life and Legacy".

The exhibition ran from 5/6/18 to 15/7/18 and was visited by 16,600 people with an extra 100 people attending the opening. In addition, research was shared through talks during the exhibition period, from Professor Vanessa Toulmin, from the National Fairground, and Circus Archive and by local historian, Andrew Dobraszczyc. Andrew also led two guided walks from the museum to the significant sites in Newcastle relating to the Astley family. Throughout the exhibition there were circus related trails and craft activities for children and interactives in the exhibition itself.





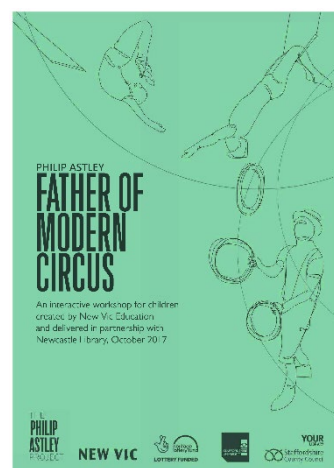
The research was compiled by Carmel Thomason at Staffordshire University into a Resource Pack for a general audience. A printed edition of the pack was launched during a celebration event at Staffordshire University on 28 Nov 2018, where 125 printed packs were distributed. The pack is also available online as a series of downloadable pdfs via the Philip Astley Project website <https://www.philipastley.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Philip-Astley-resource-pack.pdf>.





Guests including, Mayor of Newcastle Gill Heesom, Lord Mayor of Stoke on Trent Lillian Dodd, Chairman of Staffordshire County Council Michael Greateorex and Leader of Newcastle Borough Council Simon Tagg, were entertained by a Charlie Chaplin impressionist and various circus performers. During the event the exhibition boards from the Bampton Museum Astley exhibition were displayed in the adjacent gallery alongside a selection of artefacts on loan from the Van Buren Organisation. An associated film, produced by Ray Johnson, was premiered at the same event in November and is available online <https://www.philipastley.org.uk/gallery/>. Following speeches Channel 4 TV show, 'Extreme Cake Makers' presented a special 'Extreme Philip Astley cake'.

An educational resource, designed to be used as an interactive workshop for children, was developed by the New Vic Education team and Newcastle-under-Lyme Library. It is available online alongside the other resources <https://www.philipastley.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Father-of-modern-day-circus.pdf> The education resource was further supported by a Train the Trainer event which saw 9 participants attend and work with school children to test the workshop, and to enable them to deliver the workshop in the future.





## A Philip Astley exhibition at the Brompton Museum in association with the Victoria and Albert museum

As part of the 250th Anniversary of the first circus, Brompton Museum hosted an exhibition that celebrated the life of Philip Astley and his family connections to Newcastle-under-Lyme. Archive material, costume, sights and sounds were used to examine the man and the myths that surround his meteoric rise from the son of a Newcastle cabinet maker to Father of the Modern Circus.



The centrepiece of the exhibition was a scale model of Astley's amphitheatre taken from a contemporary print showing the building's impressive interior. Using loan material from the V & A Museum, Chethams Library, and other museums which included drawings, engravings and prints of Astley's riding school and amphitheatres the exhibition displayed the progression from wooden outdoor structure through to the magnificent amphitheatre of the early 19th century and included a recreated section of Astley Amphitheatre based on an image of Astley's Amphitheatre painted in 1806. The exhibition ran from 5/6/18 to 15/7/18 and was visited by 16,600 people.

### Exhibition visitor comments:

'Loved the original facsimile documents - the film - excellent!'

'I loved the dressing up and the mini circus'

This is an excellent exhibition. Well laid out, well presented, informative and educational.'

'I particularly liked the paintings and the info board about Philips life's and Newcastle's history as I don't know much about that period of Newcastle's History.'

'Not being born in N staffs but having lived here for over 50 years - I am still learning. This is an ideal subject for this museum. The input by all concerned is greatly appreciated.'

'Interesting to learn about his every-day life and the local connection. Thought it was interesting how it was weaved into the history of Newcastle.'

'A lot of work has gone into the exhibition, its a shame it was so noisy while the film was running, it did hinder our knowledge.'

'A wonderful window on 18th century life.'

'I heard of Philip Astley through reading earlier this year. Suddenly - He's everywhere! There were theatre performances, statues and exhibitions! Fascinating! I can't believe I'd never heard of such a charitable local character before now.'

'I was aware of the celebration through connection with the New Vic, but knew very little about Astley. Well assembled exhibition - very informative. Whetted my appetite for this afternoon's activities and for the New Vic performance next week.'

'The council should encourage people more with exhibitions like this one, especially about local people. I did not know about Philip Astley until now (I am 40!).'

### A display of circus posters in town centre businesses and hoardings

Artists Grega Graves from Creative Art North Staffordshire designed subway artwork and window hoarding with students from Newcastle under Lyme College over a 6 week which went on to feature in the town trail. For more detail, see below. A PR pack for businesses was produced to encourage businesses to raise awareness of Philip Astley by using bunting and vinyls to decorate their windows. Free Town Trail maps were available from shops on the High Street.

### A town trail and quiz

Newcastle-under-Lyme BID and Creative Art North Staffordshire were commissioned to create a Philip Astley Town Trail Map to tell visitors about the life of Philip Astley. The trail used window vinyls placed at specific locations around the town and combined art from Creative Art North Staffs with artwork by local Newcastle College students. There were two trail routes visitors could follow, the creative tour and a second trail of historic and cultural sites linked to Philip Astley and his life. Maps were available to visitors from the Newcastle MADE Shop on Lancaster Building on the High Street and were also available to download online via the Philip Astley website. The town trail was downloaded from the Philip Astley website 227 times.



Artist Grega Greaves from Creative Art North Staffordshire created 250 clown egg style painted stones to form an installation, called 'Clowning Around', that encircle the town centre in a ring. The Philip Astley volunteer team held a special Heritage Open Days tour. This included a tour by Andrew Van Buren and was recorded on film by Ray Johnson. The tour took 12 visitors around both the creative and historical town trail and concluded in the new library to showcase the new circus themed children's library. Participants on the tour got to meet students who produced the artwork for the trail.



Attendance to the town was up 34.4% for the period June – August 2018, this included visitors to the evening part of Homecoming (An annual summer event in the town that this year The Philip Astley project extended into the evening with pop-up circus performances in town centre venues), and the Town Trail. <http://www.philipastley.org.uk/news/homecoming-by-night/>





A Philip Astley themed pub quiz took place on 14 November 2018 at the Old Pomona Inn at Belong Village, Newcastle-under-Lyme and was attended by 26 adults.

#### Philip Astley related film screenings and talks by circus industry experts

The film programme was run from Staffordshire Film Theatre a well-established Wednesday free film screening programme and hosted by Dr Ray Johnson. The programme has a core of regular attendees. Films included: The Greatest Show on Earth (1952), La Strada (1957), The Circus (1928) & The Van Buren story a documentary drawn from archival material. 256 people attended the initial screenings, which exceeded the project target of 200. Due to the success of the previous screenings Stoke Film Theatre extended the circus season with screenings of Trapeze (1956) on 10 October 2018 which was attended by 40 people and Man on a Tightrope (1953) on 17 October 2018, which was attended by 30 people. In total, 326 people attended the film screening programme.



The local history talks were a combination of booked talks by local societies and groups and public talks. The talks featured most prominently at the start of the programme (Nov 2017– Feb 2018) and with additional talks featured alongside the exhibition at the Brampton Museum and Art Gallery in May/June. As primary research was underway at the time of the talks, additional content was added building on recent findings. At Keele University friends group talk, fellow archive sub group members introduced recent facts about Astley to a small audience. More than 450 people attended talks.

#### Children's library activities and competitions for children on the theme of Philip Astley



As part of a linked initiative to Newcastle's entry into the Britain in Bloom competition, more than 24 primary, secondary and special schools took part in a children's painting competition. A selection from the 1040 entries were displayed in an exhibition at The Art Studio, Barracks Road, Newcastle from Wednesday 25th April until Thursday 3rd May. The exhibition was attended by 50 people. The children's creations reflected their interpretation of Philip Astley. The competition winners received certificates and prizes from the Borough Mayor at Keele University on 13 June. The Award Ceremony was attended by 150 people. In July 30 adults and 30 children participated on Bloom judging days.

#### Community workshops on heritage circus skills leading to a community performance in untraditional spaces



The New Vic Theatre recruited new members (16+) for the New Vic Community Theatre to perform in Roll Up, Roll Up a new community performance shown as part of Astley Fest. In total 448 participants took part across 16 sessions. The production was written by a young local writer Kat Boon and produced with the New Vic Community Theatre. Workshops took place on Saturday 12 May, during which professional artists Director Ruth Carney, Choir Leader Mary Keith and Circus lead, Andrew Van Buren talked to the group about Astley and his legacy and encouraged the participants to try a number of circus skills for the first time.

Deliver a programme of heritage circus events and workshops on the theme of the 250th anniversary of the circus

World Circus Day, on 21 April 2018, was celebrated in Newcastle-under-Lyme by the unveiling of new public art work developed by a PM Training and Realise Foundation, which 50 people attended. In addition to visits from the Circus Friends Association and a representative of Fédération Mondiale du Cirque, two talks were held at the New Vic Theatre. <http://www.philipastley.org.uk/news/> In June 2018, Homecoming at Night delivered heritage events in bars and pubs in Newcastle-under-Lyme's town centres, sharing facts about Philip Astley through bespoke beer mats and social media. The Homecoming evening events were attended by 159 people.



This was the first time the Homecoming daytime programme has extended into the evening in bars across the town. Four circus acts performed including world record yo-yo-er, rappers, and jugglers.

<http://www.philipastley.org.uk/news/homecoming-by-night/>

A large-scale public event including “open call” community led sections

AstleyFest was a free daytime festival which took place at Lyme Valley Park it attracted an estimated 8,000 attenders during the day. AstleyFest included circus performances, horse shows, military displays, hands-on activities and a performance by community company performers of a new play by the New Vic Roll up, Roll up. The event also included community stallholders, and food and drink vendors.







## Project profile and publicity



Newcastle-under-Lyme won Gold in the regional Britain in Bloom Competition for its circus themed gardens, and the Philip Astley Project was awarded Gold in the Enjoy Staffordshire Judges Choice Best Newcomer Category.

More than a million people were exposed to key messages through media and marketing. The majority of this was through media/press coverage with online readership and daily circulation figures for print and online media contributing significantly to this.

## Media coverage:

Philip Astley – the man who sent in the clowns

<https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/news/history/philip-astley--man-who-1089827>

Could 'father of the modern circus' Philip Astley be our Shakespeare?

<https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/news/could-father-modern-circus-philip-1089754>

Philip Astley anniversary: the fun stuff you can watch to celebrate 250 years of the circus in North Staffordshire <https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/whats-on/family-kids/philip-astley-circus-250-anniversary-1381478>

A book about the 'Father of the Modern Circus' has been re-issued as part of anniversary celebrations <https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/news/history/book-father-modern-circus-been-1104374>

Country Life: How a horse-mad Englishman pioneered the modern circus

<https://www.countrylife.co.uk/out-and-about/dogs/horse-mad-englishman-pioneered-modern-circus-181821#1WYwkWOpF2xhUuPy.99>

The Independent: Roll up, roll up, for the greatest showman on earth: How Philip Astley created the modern circus [https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long\\_reads/philip-astley-250-anniversary-uk-first-modern-circus-greatest-showman-a8141826.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/philip-astley-250-anniversary-uk-first-modern-circus-greatest-showman-a8141826.html)

[http://www.inspiredfilmandvideo.co.uk/case\\_studies\\_posts/philip-astley-project/](http://www.inspiredfilmandvideo.co.uk/case_studies_posts/philip-astley-project/)

<http://www.newvictheatre.org.uk/roll-roll-chance-get-involved/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFYE-LYuJQc>

<https://www.raconteur.net/current-affairs/circus-for-the-soul>

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<https://staffordshirechambers.co.uk/latest/local-businesses-pledge-their-support-to-the-philipastley-project/>

<http://www.midlandsinbusiness.com/2017/05/organisations-collaborate-celebrate-life-philip-astley/>

<http://gandeyworldclass.blogspot.com/2017/11/the-philip-astley-project-evening-at.html>

<http://www.audleyfhs.co.uk/news.htm>

<https://thephoenixnewspaper.com/roll-roll-250th-anniversary-modern-circus>

<http://www.gandeyscircus.com/the-philip-astley-project.html>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/3wXjftg874Gt4NINmtmBh8/eight-books-that-will-make-you-want-to-run-away-with-the-circus>

<https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-field/20180801/282754882462892>

<http://www.gravity-levity.net/ato/circus-symposium-philip-astley-legacy-modern-circus/>

[https://www.inspiredfilmandvideo.co.uk/case\\_studies\\_posts/philip-astley-project/](https://www.inspiredfilmandvideo.co.uk/case_studies_posts/philip-astley-project/)



<https://www.plinkfizz.com/blog/2018/01/philip-astley-project-garners-national-recognition/>

[https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long\\_reads/philip-astley-250-anniversary-uk-first-modern-circus-greatest-showman-a8141826.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/philip-astley-250-anniversary-uk-first-modern-circus-greatest-showman-a8141826.html)

<http://www.staffs.ac.uk/news/project-celebrates-father-of-modern-circus-tcm4293806.jsp>

<https://www.circusfriends.co.uk/philip-astley-project>

<https://realisefoundation.org.uk/blog/charity-unveils-15ft-sculptures-in-honour-of-philip-astley-father-of-the-modern-circus/>

<https://www.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/news/organisations-collaborate-celebrate-life-philip-astley>

<http://www.enjoystaffordshire.com/blog/2018/01/philip-astley-father-of-the-modern-circus-b60>

<https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/news/local-news/sculpture-circus-founder-philip-astley-1485423>

<http://omgstaffs.com/tag/the-philip-astley-project/>

<http://www.sot2021.com/whats-on/events/2017/andrew-van-buren-in-conversation-with-charlie-cairoli>

<http://www.appetitestoke.co.uk/whatson/astleyfest>

<https://www.filmarchive.org.uk/blogs/news/tagged/astley>

[https://issuu.com/timesechoandlife/docs/newcastle\\_life\\_issue\\_14](https://issuu.com/timesechoandlife/docs/newcastle_life_issue_14)

<http://circusmania.blogspot.com/2018/05/father-of-circus-celebrated-in-philip.html>

[http://www.circusfederation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Circus\\_Zeitung-World\\_Circus\\_Day\\_Special\\_2018\\_high\\_resol.pdf](http://www.circusfederation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Circus_Zeitung-World_Circus_Day_Special_2018_high_resol.pdf)

<https://staffslive.co.uk/2018/07/philip-astley-his-life-and-legacy/>

<https://staffslive.co.uk/2018/02/philip-astley-project/>

<https://staffslive.co.uk/2018/07/astleys-astounding-adventures-review/>

<https://staffslive.co.uk/2018/03/nofitstate-circus-lexicon/>

<https://staffslive.co.uk/2018/03/the-history-of-circus-to-go-on-display-in-newcastle-under-lyme/>



Japanese Publication



Canadian publication

There were 13,744 engagements across social media, including 2,695 followers across social media regularly receiving Philip Astley updates and 744 uses of #astleyproject

## Steering group

The Philip Astley Project was a consortium led by Staffordshire University. It was managed by a steering group which included:

- Appetite
- Bampton Museum & Art Gallery
- Friends of the Bampton Museum & Art Gallery
- Keele University
- Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council
- Newcastle-under-Lyme Civic Society
- Newcastle-under-Lyme College
- Newcastle-under-Lyme Business Improvement District (BID)
- New Vic Theatre
- Staffordshire Library and Information Service
- Staffordshire Film Archive
- Van Buren Organisation

## Future opportunities

Following from the work of the Philip Astley Project, the steering group member organisations have founded a Community Interest Company (CIC) to further develop the heritage of Newcastle-under-Lyme and its circus connection.

An independent evaluation report conducted by the Audience Agency suggests there is an appetite for this, indicating that the project has led to an increase in knowledge and pride from local people and a significantly increased awareness overall internationally. The evaluators found, on average across the project, 56% of people have now heard of Philip Astley, and are aware of his link to Newcastle-under-Lyme and his invention. This is an increase on the baseline of 11% from the first phase of the project.

Data drawn from surveys and interviews analysed in the report indicate several key areas which the new CIC may wish to explore further, these are:

- Support for schools/FE/HE – circus skills and local history
- Digital repository / archives - where research can be easily located from multiple locations the public usually search for information (online, library, museum)
- Exhibition/s drawing on Astley and other related themes
- Circus school – encouraging the next generation of performers
- Bringing heritage to life through drama and performances
- Community events – utilising the green spaces in the town and therefore animating the town / town centre.